Food Ethics Council

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Veganism – for the few or the many?

How should food businesses respond to the vegan trend?

Veganism – for the few or the many?

What is veganism?

When we refer to 'veganism', most people think of vegan food. However, for many, the definition of (ethical) veganism goes much broader than that. It is: "*A philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude - as far as is possible and practicable - all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of humans, animals and the environment*.[1]". So, veganism can extend beyond food choices and vegan food alone.

Another definition of veganism includes an appeal for non-violence: "Veganism… is an everyday, fundamental way of life concerned with *living without hurting others*… There are several roads to veganism and many individual views of it, but veganism is one thing and one thing only – a way of living which avoids exploitation whether it be of our fellow [hu]man, the animal population, or the soil upon which we all rely for our very existence." (Eva Batt, 1964)

It was suggested that ethics and environmental sustainability can be consistent with the above interpretations of veganism.

The recent rise of veganism and vegan food

There are an estimated 600,000 vegans in the UK (2019). Quantifying the phenomenon, last year 25% of new food products launched in the UK were vegan. In 2019 nearly two-thirds of Britons chose to eat meat substitutes, while sales of meat-free foods are estimated to have grown 40% to a value of £816 million. There are predictions that the vegan market will soon top £1 billion for the first time, which would be a doubling in value in the past 20 years.

However, some may argue that the recent rise of veganism is a temporary fad and would highlight that despite recent growth, the number of vegans in the UK only represents just over 1% of the population. Others would point to a quadrupling of the number of vegans in the UK since 2014 and argue that the rise in veganism in mainstream society is here to stay.

According to the Vegan Society, interest in veganism increased seven-fold in the five years between 2014 and 2019, based on Google trends. Many food businesses have responded, with the UK launching more vegan products in 2018 than any other nation. But what is driving this growth, is it likely to continue and what should food businesses do? People are becoming vegans and/or eating more vegan food for a range of legitimate reasons. However, should veganism be a lifestyle choice for the (relatively) few or something that many or even everyone aspires to?

"…there is a lot to be done to improve the welfare of animals in certain systems and the way farming is managed on an environmental basis. We have to be grateful to vegans and vegetarians for raising those issues.[3]"

The impacts of the rise in veganism

Firstly, has the increase in veganism led to a reduction in the use of animals for meat and dairy products? The short answer is no (or not yet), as globally, demand for meat continues to increase, with perhaps 65 billion land animals incorporated within the farming system currently. In the UK, according to Defra, prime cattle slaughtering, beef and veal production and sheep production were all 6-7% higher in September 2019 than a year earlier. Some of the meat statistics are presented in tonnes and it was noted how it was interesting (or challenging to some) that individual sentient beings are sometimes reduced to tonnage.

Has the rise in veganism promoted cruelty-free living? There is a problematic relationship around the by-products of meat production. Fruit and vegetables are also often grown using manure, blood and bone. And what about harm to *human* animals? Shocking examples exist of modern-day slavery and cruelty to humans in fruit and vegetable production (as well as in other sectors). These include harrowing stories of exploitation, poor living accommodation and even sexual exploitation. Surely this is not consistent with a principled notion of veganism?

There is surely a need for businesses to work for equity for *all* involved in the production of foods (whether plant-based or not) – in terms of fair pay and fair working conditions. Greggs recently awarded staff a £300 windfall each off the back of a rise in profits in 2019, with the vegan sausage roll as its posterchild.

"…. are we trying to promote ethical veganism or plant-based foodism[3]?"

[1] https://www.vegansociety.com/go-vegan/definition-veganism

Who gets to be vegan?

There is a suspicion that vegans in the UK constitute an elitist, white, middle-class lifestyle. Is that true and, if so, how can that be challenged and how can the veganism movement become more inclusive?

There is a very uneven playing field. *If* either veganism or an increase in plant-based eating were regarded as desirable, then should there be more lobbying to engender a radical shift from farmed animal agricultural subsidies, particularly those to intensive livestock farms? The Bureau of Investigative Journalism reported that £70 million in subsidies between 2016-17 went to those adopting a highly intensive form of animal husbandry, such as poultry mega farms and intensive egg producers using caged housing systems.

A campaign was proposed to make vegan meals more available in public settings such as schools, hospitals and prisons. There are legitimate questions to answer about how to tackle inclusivity and the lack of representation of People of Colour in mainstream images of veganism.

Should governments intervene?

Will there be government interventions to shift the balance away from meat to more plant-based eating? Some have estimated a meat tax in the UK might result in £700 million healthcare cost savings, not including environmental costs or impacts on farmed animals themselves. However, others have argued that there would be serious problems with such an approach, not least the assumption that all meat is somehow inherently bad plus the regressive nature of taxes such as these. A Food Ethics Council 'jury' found that an over-simplistic meat tax is likely to create further problems[2] and recommended alternative approaches.

There are lots that national governments, local authorities and businesses can – and should – do to encourage behaviours and diets that are better for people, animals and the planet. How do we give people real options and empower them through knowledge and understanding? In everyday conversations, there are prejudices about meat eating being 'normal, natural and necessary', while there are often sacrificial overtures about veganism being 'purgatory'. However, advocates of veganism argue there is a whole world of pleasures out there beyond animal products.

Veganism and health

It was argued that well placed vegan diets *can* have positive health impacts. In contrast, vegan fast foods can be very high in sugar and salt. Should we be celebrating the fast-food chains that are producing more plant-based foods? There is a suspicion amongst some that this is purely something to commodify, a lucrative market, a competitive advantage for businesses just to exploit and profit from. No matter how many vegan products the large fast-food chains make, because of the enormous profits gained from the exploitation of animals, it was suggested that many vegans would not eat from there unless there was an explicit commitment to change.

Much as not all meat or dairy are produced equally, not all vegan food is produced equally – and it is debatable whether ultra-processed vegan food is any 'better' than ultra-processed meat food.

The importance of language

There are different perspectives on what a working definition of veganism should be. What are the differences between veganism and a plant-based food system? The ethical imperatives that underpin veganism are in danger of being marginalised or lost when the term becomes mainstreamed. A decade or more ago, a vegan was an eccentric figure on the margins, now it is a trendy celebrity-endorsed lifestyle.

Food businesses sometimes refer to 'plant-based' food rather than using the term 'vegan'. What should lab-grown food be called? There are huge amounts of lobbying behind the scenes about what to call products or categories of products.

Language is important. If we treat people as people (or food citizens), rather than (often powerless) 'consumers' at the end of a chain, it opens up many more opportunities to (re-)consider our relationship with animals, the land, landscapes and beyond. There are important distinctions to be made too between different types, methods and scales of farming. Hence it is important not to treat all farming of farmed animals equally.

The cruelty of nature?

It was suggested that the cruelty of nature can be "way beyond what even the cruellest dairy farmer exercises". Taking the example of wild cows, it was argued that most would have a shorter life span in the

[2] Food Ethics Council – meat tax 'in the dock'

wild and would be unlikely to get a humane death, particularly in comparison to smallholders keeping livestock free-range and humanely.

A critical question to consider is whether farmed animals are given a life worth living. While this remains a contested area, what is clear is that *if* animals are farmed, they should be given as much opportunity as possible to live a good life and have a humane death.

Transparency and honesty are key

It is important for food and farming businesses to tell the truth. It is impossible to keep dark, hidden (sometimes violent) spaces away from the public. In 2017, a full-page advert in the Sunday Telegraph by GoVeganWorld (entitled 'Humane milk is a myth') drew public attention to the lived experiences of dairy cows. Their depiction of violence and suffering attracted complaints – some of which were from the dairy industry - that this was an unfair reflection of UK dairy farming. The Advertising Standards Agency rejected this complaint ruling that the advert's image and information was not misleading. The Washington Post ran a story about how trying to keep dairy farmers in the dairy business was a Herculean task, with the suggestion they should move towards plant-based agriculture and other opportunities outside of dairy production instead. Others argue that humane and sustainable dairy farming is possible.

The rise of micro-organism-based food?

Critique of meat and dairy has largely been from animal rights and environmental campaigners in the past, but in more recent times, an economic argument has been growing. Brands such as Quorn (fungus-derived) are worth hundreds of millions of dollars. A controversial documentary featuring George Monbiot showed the Helsinki Solar Foods protein, bacteria fed on hydrogen. It is claimed the company is able to produce protein that is not only cheaper than meat, but cheaper than soya. It was suggested they may undercut livestock feed producers and sell the products as animal feed as an even cheaper alternative. Many challenge such developments, not least on the grounds that these proteins are a move away from 'real food'. What happens though if these forms of food, which are not so much plant-based as micro-organism based, prove to be significantly cheaper than not only meat but also farm-grown vegetables? Will attitudes change?

In one dystopian vision of the future, the wealthy may opt for 'real' agricultural-grown food, either meat- or plant-based, real vegetables, or grains. These might become niche commodities that foodies will want to buy, and that are more expensive than standard microbe-based food. In this scenario, the loser would be intensive meat production which would likely be under attack from people on ethical, environmental and economic grounds and would be too expensive to justify its consumption. What would be left would be greater inequality – high-quality meat and veg for the few, with microbe-based food for the many. For lots, this will feel like a dystopian vision.

It was suggested that problematic farming now is, in large part, the result of very low margins in the sector. If the margins were higher, then farmers could take additional actions to mitigate harm and/or to maximise positive impacts from farming.

The future of veganism

Veganism is something more people are embracing. It was argued that veganism can take you on adventures, is dynamic and is evolving towards something that is less cruel, less exploitative of both humans and non-human animals and tackling environmental sustainability. This is gathering momentum, including the numbers taking part in Veganuary and the rise in product-based innovation. The vegan market globally is projected to be worth £24.3 billion by 2026.

Hope was expressed that mainstream veganism will evolve in important and profitable ways that are conscious of some of the limits and opportunities identified here. Will the future of veganism come back more closely to achieving some of the ethical ideals upon which it was grounded and conceived? We are a long way away from dismantling of current power structures and creating a shift in social norms where non-human animals are no longer thought of as food.

> *"The trouble with the vegan approach is that it throws the baby out with the bathwater by tackling all meat and all dairy as the same"*

Some are concerned that the negativity (what they describe as) 'militant vegans' sometimes have towards "livestock" farmers is damaging. Whether or not people agree with more activist approaches, it is important to avoid simplifying and polarising complex debates. There are many different trajectories and pathways for veganism, from ethical reasons and concern for the welfare of farmed animals, environmental impacts, and more personal self-oriented reason of health.

The rise of flexitarianism

It is important to note that much of the rise in vegan products in the UK versus the (still relatively) small proportion of vegans is driven by more people wanting to eat less meat (and dairy). Many people are exploring vegan options without deciding to become full vegans. Many will welcome the push for "less and better" meat and dairy. However, from an absolutist perspective, is 'flexitarianism' a watering down of veganism from a highly principled position of non-violence to vegan food as just one of a range of options in a diet that might still include meat and dairy?

Concluding comments

What seems to resonate in the public arena currently are messages like 'plastic is bad' or 'veganism is good'. However, (over)simplistic messages like these do not always work. When it comes to sustainable food systems, we need to be ready to embrace complexity, rather than shy away from it. Nuances do matter.

Ben Mepham (Founder Director of the Food Ethics Council), when reviewing 'The Animal Rights Debate: Abolition or Regulation?', concluded "if the aim of ethics is to choose the right, or best, course of action in specific circumstances 'all things considered', it is arguable that adherence to such an absolutist agenda is simplistic and open to serious self-contradictions." Or, as Simon Fairlie put it at the time, "to conclude that veganism is the 'only ethical response' is to take a big leap into a very muddy pond."

Veganism can be an ethical response, but many will argue it is not the *only* ethical response. There is an important difference between respecting people choosing veganism and a view that everyone should become vegans. Veganism may not become mainstream, but a meal with no meat and dairy is now a mainstream option in the UK. What is becoming clear is that even if veganism is for the few (currently at least), more vegan food is for the many.

Crucially, the question we should ask is not 'vegan or not vegan' but instead, is it 'ethical or unethical' (or is it 'sustainable or not')? Those are more complicated questions than 'plant-based or animal-based?' Hopefully, we can agree that polarising the debate is unhelpful and what we should strive for are food systems that are kind to (or respect) people, animals and the planet. The debate about what constitutes kindness and respect will rumble on.

We've created a system with lots of big abattoirs and those animals that can least cope with it have to take that journey. Can we coalesce around this as one of the big issues of our time... [It] is not about being vegan or not, it's about how we eat in a way that takes care of people, animals and environment.[3]*"*

What next?

Key questions to ask:

- How can unintended consequences of a shift towards veganism be best addressed?
- Should vegans be promoting ethical veganism or plant-based foodism?
- How can we help farmers (livestock and arable) transition towards sustainable farming?

Further resources

1. Richard White (2018) – "Looking Backward, Moving Forward: Articulating a "Yes, BUT…!" Response to Lifestyle Veganism" - link here
2. Simon Fairlie (2013) – Meat: a benign extravagance – link here
3. lowimpact.org (2018) 'Is eating meat ethical or sustainable? Interview with Simon Fairlie, author of 'Meat: A Benign Extravagance' – link here
4. Food Ethics Council (2019) – Food Policy on Trial jury verdict: meat tax 'in the dock' – link here

Other relevant Business Forum reports:

- **Meat tax: does tax have to be taxing?** *How can we fairly respond to the meat challenge?* – link here
- **A steak in the future**. *Even if we can grow cultured meat, should we?* – link here
- **Meat insecurity:** Should we worry about eating our fair share of meat? – link here

This is a report of the Business Forum meeting on 21st January 2020. We are grateful to our speakers, **Dr Richard White,** Reader in Human Geography at Sheffield Hallam University; **Simon Fairlie**, who runs a microdairy, is an author (including of 'Meat: A Benign Extravagance') and co-editor of The Land magazine; and **Ruth Layton**, founder of sankalpa and Trustee of the Food Ethics Council. **Patti Whaley**, Chair of the Food Ethics Council, chaired the meeting. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Food Ethics Council, nor its members.
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[3] Quotes from Business Forum participants